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The Struggle to be Poor in Vietnam's Northern Borderlands: Political Metis and Biopower in the Local State Arena

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The state is a pervasive presence in the everyday lives of the people of Vĩnh Thủy commune, a remote and mountainous commune in Vietnam's northern Lào Cai Province.[1] State-owned companies dominate business, the state underwrites agricultural production, and state rituals and state cadre regulate social life in a way unimaginable in urban and lowland areas of the country. But the state's presence is perhaps felt most keenly through the provision of poverty reduction and welfare support to the people of the commune. This support

increased enormously throughout the 1990s and is now a defining feature of the relationship between the state and the people of the northern borderlands.

The increased welfare role of the state has, in turn, led to an increasing bureaucratisation of everyday life. Consequently, local people in the borderlands have necessarily become more knowledgeable about the state and have an increased level of confidence in engaging with officials. As a senior member of the state's ethnic minority affairs committee in Hà Nội remarked to me: 'ethnic minority people are changing, they're making more demands and it's harder to keep them satisfied than it used to be'. Both the ubiquitousness of the state and its changed role in relation to the citizenry has in turn spawned a particular kind of politics, as local people increasingly seek to engage productively with the state for the resources on offer. Inverting James Scott's classic conception of the role of the state and its engagement with the citizenry, Andrew Walker describes this as a shift 'from legibility to eligibility' (Walker 2015).

In Vĩnh Thủy commune, this manifests itself most visibly in the way local people struggle to be recognised by the state as 'poor', and thus eligible for critical government resources. There is a notable lack of stigma attached to being called poor, in contrast to lowland and more urban areas of Vietnam where the term 'poor' (*nghèo*) has more pejorative connotations. This is perhaps because many people in the commune are classified as either poor or 'near-poor' (*cận nghèo*).[2] The status is not exceptional and being 'poor' is a classification that is actively sought, as it signals recognition from the state of a right to access resources.[3]

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2   For the period 2011–15, the rural poor were classified as those with an income below 400,000 VND per person per month (about $20 USD). The rural near-poor were classified as those with an income of between 401,000 and 520,000 VND per person per month ($20–26 USD) (Government decision no. 09/2011/QĐ-TTg).

3   I use the term 'state' here and throughout the chapter to refer to the ensemble of Communist Party and Government of Vietnam organisations, ministries, departments and officials that are responsible for ruling the country today. I make a critical distinction between higher-level state organisations and officials (at the national, provincial and district levels), which I call the centre state, and the 'local state' commune and village-level officials who are the focus of this chapter. I appreciate, though, that the centre state too is not a unitary entity, and that there is significant contestation and conflict between branches of the Party, government ministries and departments, and between different levels of administration (see MacLean 2013 for a thorough discussion on these dynamics). I witnessed this contestation at close quarters as an embedded adviser in two government ministries in Hà Nội from 2008–12.

Increasing integration with market forces is taking place in the northern borderlands, and socioeconomic differentiation and stratification is slowly but increasingly evident in the commune. But it is still fair to say that the vast majority of the people of Vĩnh Thủy have very little, and can rightfully lay claim to being called poor. Indeed, a common observation made in the commune during my fieldwork for this study was that it was only those households that had someone employed as a commune or village official (about 10 per cent of the households in the commune), and who consequently earned a regular government salary, that were categorically not poor. Everyone else could credibly claim to be poor according to the prevailing moral norms of the commune.

Vĩnh Thủy is overwhelmingly populated by ethnic minority people, a common situation in the border areas of northern Vietnam. The commune population is evenly split between Hmông and Nùng ethnic minority households, with each group constituting about 40 per cent of the population overall. The next largest group is the Dao, with 10 per cent, and the remaining households are made up of smaller ethnic groups, such as the Tu'Si, the Pa'Si (also called the Bố Y), and a few Kinh and Tày people. There are 12 villages in the commune and each village is primarily ethnically based, with five of the villages Hmông, four Nùng, and two Dao. Only the central village is ethnically mixed.[4]

The ethnic demographics of the commune are reflected in the formal division of local state power. The allocation of official positions in the local state structure is carefully calibrated through long-standing conventions that are supported by district party and government officials, in order to ensure an equal division of power between the dominant Hmông and Nùng groups. Each of the other ethnic groups receives one position in the local Party-state machinery, but the vast majority of the Party and commune people's committee positions in the local administration are divided between these two ethnic groups. In particular, the two most important positions of Party Secretary and Commune Chairman are always divided between the Hmông and Nùng in the commune.[5] Two family lineages within each group in turn

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4   The central village is also the most prosperous, with all of the Kinh households living there. The largest village is a Nùng village but with a significant Dao population (about 20 per cent).
5   I discuss this ethnic division of power in more detail in my PhD dissertation and in a forthcoming journal article.

dominate these official positions. They have done so for generations, with power handed on from father to son, uncle to nephew, cousin to cousin.[6] These two networks of power directly encompass a large number of people through kinship and clan ties, but also through relationships of debt, reciprocity, and friendship.

Existing developmental and conceptual approaches to framing poverty reduction processes and ethnic minority agency provide significant insight into understanding the politics of poverty in northern Vietnam, as we shall see. This chapter synthesises and adapts elements of these approaches to offer a hybrid view of post-socialist development in the uplands, a view which emphasises the iterative, practical, and locally embedded ways in which people in Vĩnh Thủy commune exercise political agency. Contrary to the view that ethnic minority people seek to evade or bypass the state, I see evidence that ethnic minority people are actively engaged with the state in complex and varied ways, and are adept at pursuing what Sherry Ortner describes as their own projects 'on the margins of power' (Ortner 2006:142).

This chapter ethnographically explores the manifestation of this political agency through the coming together of two important political processes in the commune. Firstly, the domination by ethnic minority elites, as local officials, of local state power and poverty reduction processes. Secondly, local people laying claim to state resources through the connections they make to these local state officials. Through this engagement, apolitical and technocratic state designs for poverty reduction are adapted and reworked in line with local structures of power as local elites and local people exercise what I describe as a local 'biopower' project, albeit one that feeds off the wider biopolitical project for poverty reduction of the centre state. This local biopolitical project ensures poverty reduction resources are used to foster life in a relatively equitable and harmonious way for those who are connected to power, though with negative consequences for the unconnected. Local people (officials and citizens both) deploy the governmental language of poverty reduction and the associated technologies and classificatory categories of the government in pursuit

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6   Within the local state apparatus, at the time of my fieldwork, the dominant Hmông lineage directly controlled six of the most important positions in the commune, while the most powerful Nùng lineage controlled seven key positions. There are 22 official positions listed in the commune's manifest of Party-state officers.

of their own projects of power. They are consequently engaged in both shaping, but also being shaped by, the very state categories and governmental processes they are seeking to subvert, or access. What results then is neither a totalising governmentality, nor fully free agency, but a complex, hybrid political entanglement which takes place on the unevenly contoured landscape of power in Vĩnh Thủy commune.

In the next section, I consider the existing literature on the relationship between people, poverty and the state in the ethnic minority periphery, in order to situate my conceptual approach. I then briefly discuss the state's historical project of power in the northern uplands and locate the poverty reduction efforts of the state within this continuum. The importance of these state resources to household efforts at accumulation is highlighted here. The following section discusses the annual poor household census as the principal means for deciding who is classified as poor in Vĩnh Thủy. The section after this considers household strategies for registering eligibility to government poverty reduction resources, followed by a discussion of the condition of 'stasis' that results for those who are left behind in the struggle to be poor. The final section of the chapter draws conclusions from the preceding discussion.

People, Poverty and the State in the Ethnic Minority Periphery

Before engaging in my ethnographic account of the struggle to be poor in Vĩnh Thủy, I wish to reflect upon some of the existing literature on the nature of state development processes and people's agency in the Vietnamese uplands, in order to better situate my critical perspective. I discern three prevalent perspectives in this literature and will discuss each in turn before outlining a hybrid approach through which I intend to present my ethnographic material on the local politics of poverty reduction.

The first prevalent perspective is a state-centric 'developmentalist' view, apparent in the discourse and programming of the government and of international agencies working for poverty reduction in Vietnam. It is apparent in state policy documents for poverty

reduction and the projects and programs of international agencies such as the World Bank.[7] According to this view, poverty is an abject condition, objectively measureable and scientifically definable, which results from clearly discernible deficiencies either in the physical and geographical environment, such as the topography, climate, or remoteness of settlements, or of people themselves. In this view, the ethnic minority people of the uplands are hamstrung by elements of their culture and living conditions which roots them in an inert state, and which they can only be liberated from by development and poverty reduction interventions (see Taylor 2008 for a comprehensive critique of this view). Such a view of poverty reduction is critically unreflexive and ethnographically uninformed, resulting from an abstracted and stereotyped construction of the poor. Critically, it fails to recognise how the category of 'the poor' is itself an effect of the very state-prescribed welfare flows intended to address the condition of poverty.

This is not to say that upland people are unaware of living in a state of deprivation, or of inequality. Quite the opposite in fact. Deprivation is well understood and intensely felt, for example, in having insufficient food to last the whole year, in being unable to meet ceremonial and ritual commitments, or in being beholden to others in the community through debt or labour obligations. But state-directed efforts at poverty reduction create a produced status of being 'poor', and this status appears integral to governmental attempts to bring development to the northern uplands, as it enables this development. This will become apparent through the following ethnography. Suffice it to say at this stage that 'poverty' as prescribed by the state is not necessarily abject, as no one particularly wants it to disappear: state officials, government departments, the Party, and international donors are all ennobled through being seen to combat poverty, and those who are prescribed as poor benefit from the resources that are offered. Poverty as prescribed in narrow technocratic and governmental terms appears then to be integral to extending the reach of the state in the northern borderlands of Vietnam.

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7   This view is perhaps best embodied in the landmark 2000 Vietnam Development Report 'Attacking Poverty' issued by the Government of Vietnam and international donor supporters. This report set the path for poverty reduction in Vietnam for more than a decade.

The second perspective I wish to consider critically informs the critique of state-centric developmentalism described above. According to this view, which I shall call the 'overbearing state' view, state formation at the periphery should be viewed in essentially pessimistic terms, with state agents enacting a colonising process and structuring the space available to local ethnic minority people, restricting the degree to which local agency can be exercised (Leepreecha et al. 2008; Duncan 2004; McCaskill and Kampe 1997). Scholars in the 'overbearing state' tradition observe how governmental schemes are often characterised by inflexible and bureaucratic procedures, and bureaucratic abstraction. Power is concentrated in the hands of bureaucrats and state officials, and the result is the production of indifference, arbitrariness, and unintended consequences for those who live at the periphery of state power (Gupta 2012; Herzfeld 1992; Ferguson 1990).

Writers such as Ferguson and Gupta are at pains to stress the contingent nature of bureaucratic power and emphasise how governmentality can never be totalising and hegemonic. Nevertheless, the outcomes they describe usually involve the indiscriminate destruction of viable local understandings, statuses, and strategies at the periphery. James Scott's early work is notable for the contribution it makes to this view. In his classic work, *Seeing Like a State*, he presents a bleak view of the prospects for human progress under 'high modernist' and totalising state development schemes, socialist ones in particular (Scott 1998). Interestingly, writers on the state in Vietnam have challenged Scott's early dystopian view of the possibilities of agency in the face of state power, showing its limits: Ben Kerkvliet highlighted challenges to the state 'from below' during the state socialist period, through ordinary cadre, and local farmers (Kerkvliet 2005); Ken MacLean wrote about the often ad hoc and contingent way that state socialism evolved (MacLean 2007); and Rupert Friederichsen discussed the incomplete nature of much policy implementation and the local adaptation of policies by northern ethnic minorities (Friederichsen 2012; see also McElwee 2004).

This brings us to the third approach that I wish to consider, which I shall call the 'agentive periphery' view. In Vietnam, this tradition is embodied in strong ethnographic work, which finds that local and 'peripheral' ethnic and grassroots actors have their own standards, resources, dignity, and power. People of the periphery do not wait to be uplifted by state aid, and are not passive, colonised, and reproduced

in straightforward ways by state processes and categories. Notable work in this regard includes Turner (2012), Michaud (2012), and Hanh (2008) on the Hmông, Anderson (2007) on the Nùng, and Taylor (2007) on the Khmer. These scholars recognise that the state is a colonising and productive entity, but are sceptical about the determining power of the state in realising statist developmental visions.

James Scott's recent work (Scott 2009) embodies this approach and perhaps takes the agentive periphery view to its furthest extreme, as he characterises the people of the Southeast Asian uplands as state evaders, demonstrating a capacity to avoid colonisation through deploying agentive strategies independent of an overbearing state. But Scott's position is open to critique on the grounds that it romanticises ethnic minorities, and ignores the degree to which local agency itself takes place within and is shaped by governmental categories and processes of state governmentality. Scott's 'state evasion' premise also underplays the degree to which governance is actually desired on the periphery, a critique which is also applicable to other agentive periphery advocates (Turner 2012; Bonnin and Turner 2012).

This notion of state avoidance has been effectively challenged regionally by Andrew Walker's work on northern Thai peasants' engagement with the state, wherein he effectively conflates the stand-off between state and society which is notable in some of the agentive periphery literature (Walker 2012). Holly High too examines the complex and ambivalent ways that rural Lao people engage with the state and poverty reduction programs, highlighting in particular how the state is the focus for rural people's desire, an entity they both fear and long for (High 2014). Walker and High highlight how engaging with the state is not only increasingly unavoidable, but also often desirable in the pursuit of development, broadly understood.

It seems then that drawing a sharp distinction between local and state political cultures is unhelpful in understanding the dynamic and at times contradictory processes at work in the state periphery of northern Vietnam. In particular, our framing needs to reflect the practical and everyday approaches of people situated at the state margins: the way in which they accumulate knowledge and experience in an iterative way to engage with and rework the governmental categories and technologies that are applied in the uplands. James Scott describes this capacity for improvisation and adaptation

as '*metis*': 'a wide array of practical skills and acquired intelligence in responding to a constantly changing natural and human environment' (Scott 1998:313). But whereas Scott contends that state power crushes *metis*, I wish to show that in fact in the northwest uplands of Vietnam, *metis* flourishes within the governmental processes of the state, and indeed feeds off these very processes.

Ordering the Periphery as a Continuing Project of State Power

The ethnic minority people of the northern upland region have been misrepresented and misunderstood by both lowland officials and lowland people from colonial times through to the present (Taylor 2008; McElwee 2004). Attempts to impose order upon this mysterious periphery, and render inhabitants 'legible' to the state are correspondingly long-standing, with McLeod describing lowland engagement with the uplands as a succession of 'Confucian, Christian and Communist "civilizing projects"' (McLeod 1999:354). French planners of the colonial era ascribed technocratic categories of governance to the upland peoples they attempted to pacify and incorporate into the colonial state, through narratives of 'civilisation' (*văn minh*) in particular. Modern day state planners have supplemented this with ideas of 'progress' (*tiến bộ*) and 'development' (*phát triển*) — powerful narratives that were also prevalent during the state socialist era in Vietnam (MacLean 2013). In the post-socialist uplands, poverty reduction (*giảm nghèo*) has increasingly become both a key organising and mobilising discourse, and an important technology of rule. Local people are increasingly bound into the state through the receipt of state largesse in the form of poverty reduction support. The modern project for poverty reduction then is part of the long-standing historical continuum of attempting to subdue, civilise and domesticate the people of the periphery and render them productive as modern citizens.

Co-opting influential family groups and their kinfolk into the state-building project has also always been an integral part of the attempt to impose central control over the periphery. French colonial planners attempted to assert their authority through perpetuating a system of domination by local Thai ethnic minority elites in the northwest, in an

attempt to rule the uplands through compliant proxies. But whilst a degree of order was imposed in the northern uplands as a result, rule through proxy did not work out wholly as intended for colonial planners, largely as a result of the agency and projects of power of local Thai elites themselves (Le Failler 2011; Lentz 2011). The Việt Minh and the early Democratic Republic of Vietnam, nevertheless, also worked through ethnic elites as they quickly realised that they too needed them in order to extend their writ of rule in the northern uplands. Consequently, Thai domination of other ethnic groups in the northwest continued long after liberation from the French colonial power (Lentz 2011), and rule through ethnic minority elites remains critical to governance in the northern uplands today.

From around 2000, state planners in Hà Nội have been able to mobilise significant amounts of financial capital to invest in the borderlands of the country, principally for poverty reduction. These resources have come from both internal sources and foreign or multilateral donors.[8] Support to perceived 'underdeveloped' areas of the country is of course not new. During the attempts to impose collectivisation in the countryside from the late 1950s until the mid-1980s, the state also sought to provide resources to these areas. This was also the case in the early years of *đổi mới* following the decision to abandon state socialism. Critically, though, state planners in the past were seldom able to follow through on the rhetoric of policy with material support. What is new today is the state's improved capacity to provide the promised poverty reduction resources. Who does and does not get ascribed the status of being 'poor' therefore matters a great deal.

Vĩnh Thủy commune is broadly representative of upland ethnic minority communes in the north of Vietnam generally and receives a large number of government programs for poverty reduction support. In fact, the large number of programs and the complexity of central government provision for poor areas mean that few local Party-state officials in the commune can authoritatively list all of the programs available without first checking commune records. The picture is further complicated by the existence of a number of international donor-supported projects, primarily provided through the World

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8   This trend of state investment to outlying and 'underdeveloped' regions is not particular to Vietnam alone, and can be seen throughout East and Southeast Asia. See Anderson and Martin (2008).

Bank's Northern Mountains Poverty Reduction Project, and through the international non-governmental organisation that supported my fieldwork, which has provided project support to the commune for more than 10 years.

During the period 2012–13, government programs of support to poor and near-poor households in Vĩnh Thủy encompassed the following: free hybrid corn seed and fertiliser; free rice for the very poor; free roofing and construction materials to build animal stalls (for buffalo and pigs); financial support for education for poor households (with 100 per cent educational support for smaller ethnic groups in the commune, the Pa' Si and Tu' Si); support for paying electricity bills; provision of 50 free chickens along with feeders and associated chicken breeding equipment; free ducks; free pigs as part of a revolving fund scheme; subsidised credit for poor and 'near-poor' households; free roof slates to replace those destroyed by hailstones; a Tết (New Year) holiday payment; and free health insurance and subsidised support to key farmers as part of the agricultural campaigns to promote tea and vegetable production in the commune. There were also a number of schemes to support infrastructure improvements from both central government and donor funds.

The proliferation of state support for poverty reduction means that local people are increasingly reliant upon the resources of the government for their projects of household accumulation. Government resources for poverty reduction, such as seed, fertiliser, credit, and livestock, are one of the only significant forms of capital available in remote rural areas, and thus represent a critical means through which households can structurally transform their well-being and enhance their life chances.[9] The household of Mr Khang in An Trí 2 village illustrates what a difference these poverty reduction resources can make. He has been classified as a poor household in three of the last four years (in the other year, his household was classified as 'near-poor'). Every year he receives several bags of hybrid corn seed and

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9   The increased provision of state resources to upland areas must, however, be seen in historical context. Increased state provision has occurred at the same time as state policies have closed off many of the livelihood opportunities which upland ethnic minority people have traditionally relied upon. This is most notably the case with forestry and shifting cultivation practices.

fertiliser, sufficient to ensure he is able to grow hybrid corn on almost all of his family land. As a result, he estimates that over the past four years his household has been able to triple its previous income.

He has reinvested much of the money he has made in his children's education, sending his son to one of the district high schools as a boarder. The household also receives an educational support grant which further offsets the cost of his son's education. His wife is involved in the women's group of a successful project run by the international non-governmental organisation to improve the breeding of traditional Hmông black pigs. She has successfully increased the number of pigs they have from a single pig to a litter of six, and she is now able to sell piglets in the commune market twice a year. The family plans to buy a second-hand motorcycle in the next year, with Mr Khang hoping to use the motorbike to travel to the border gate outside the district town to look for labouring work during the agricultural off-season. All of the changes experienced by the household he attributes to being classified as poor: 'Without the support of the government to us as a poor household it would have been impossible to do any of these things.'

The Annual Poor Household Census

The state's presence in the lives of the people of the northern borderlands today appears to be manifested in large part through the programs for poverty reduction support described above. The process of determining who poor households are at the local level is therefore critical. In Vĩnh Thủy commune, this process revolves around a poor household census undertaken annually in October.

In order to carry out the census, commune officers are issued with a dense 107-page guidance manual (*tài liệu hướng dẫn*) by the People's Committee of Lào Cai Province (*Ủy Ban Nhân Dân Tỉnh Lào Cai*). The manual in operation during the time I was doing fieldwork was issued in September 2013. The front cover states the intended purpose as being 'instructions for the investigation of poor and near-poor households in 2013 and health insurance for poor and near-poor people for 2014' ('*Điều tra hộ nghèo, hộ cận nghèo năm 2013 và lập*

danh sách BHYT người nghèo, cận nghèo năm 2014'). It is an exhaustive, highly comprehensive and technical set of instructions for objectively identifying those people the centre state wishes to classify as poor.

The manual contains pages and pages of pro forma tables and corresponding guidance instructions for the completion of information about poor households in the commune. There are two official resolutions (*quyết định*) at the beginning of the manual, establishing the 'Direction Committee' (*thành lập ban chỉ*) along with 'plans' (*ké hoạch*) for the poverty census process and nine different sets of guidance instructions (*hướng dẫn*) to complete the 43 different tables of information contained in the manual. For example, on page 27, guidance sheet B instructs officials in how to go about estimating a household's income (*phiếu khảo sát thu nhập hộ gia đình*). There are four pages of detailed instructions on how to do this, along with references for other instruction documents, resolutions of the Party-state, and the formula for determining which poverty band the household should be placed in, according to income. The manual recognises the difficulties inherent in profiling households in such a detailed way and prescribes a checklist of household assets that local officials should value in order to estimate the income of the poor. This checklist of assets is the primary means through which local officials undertake the annual poverty survey, as we shall see.

The manual also contains detailed lists of provincial- and district-level officials and their allocated tasks and advisory roles in the poverty identification process, and lists the communes in each district of the province which have been classified as 'disadvantaged' or 'advantaged' areas — the overwhelming majority being defined as disadvantaged. The manual serves an important ritual purpose, through sanctioning both the process and the classification of 'poverty' by the state as objective, legitimate, and beyond challenge or reproach. It spatially orders and segments areas in order to project the state's authority and validate the classificatory categories prescribed by state planners. The manual thus imbues the classification process with a higher order sanctity and prescribes 'experts' whose status stems from their position as custodians of this technocratic process of deciding who is poor.

Contradictions Inherent in the State's Poverty Reduction Project

Narratives of poverty and poverty reduction are critical to the centre state's project of power in the uplands. However, the need to project the idea of ever increasing well-being opens up spaces for the agency of local state actors. If district- and provincial-level officials are to be believed, the process of collecting data on the poor and identifying poor households is a rigorously technical process, with each step prescribed in the provincial manual followed exactly and precisely. As the deputy chairman of the District People's Committee confidently asserted to me, there is no higher-level interference with the process and data is simply collated and transmitted upwards in the administrative chain.

But commune officials are in fact given very particular quotas for how many poor people they are expected to take off the poverty list each year. This prescription is not apparent anywhere in the poverty mapping manual, but commune officials disclosed that they do indeed receive specific targets from the district for how many people in poverty they are allowed to have each year, and I have seen such written instructions — confirming this to be the case. These targets drive the poverty identification process much more than the manual itself. Thus, in 2013 the poverty target for the commune was 65.13 per cent, a reduction of 8 per cent from the previous year.

Once this annual poverty reduction target has been received, the percentage reduction is distributed between the 12 villages of the commune, according to population size. Larger villages in the commune therefore have more poor households removed from their quota. Commune officers usually have to identify two to four households in each village which they can remove from the list, and these targets are rigidly enforced by the commune government. Rates of poverty reduction therefore are only loosely correlated (if at all) with the material state of deprivation, rendering the poverty assessment and reporting process meaningless, as the commune reports numbers for poverty reduction only according to the quota they have been set. In a remarkable contortion, one commune officer sought to explain to me the exact match between the target set by the district, and the 'result' of the poverty census process, by asserting that the district

understood the poverty situation so well that the target they set corresponded exactly to the 'reality' that was discovered through the poverty census process.

The poverty mapping manual is a symbolic prop of state power: all actors pay lip-service to the manual and the technocratic process it embodies, but also know that collecting all the data required in the way that the manual stipulates would invalidate the poverty reduction target set by government planners, with which they must comply. There is a public ritual of adherence to the manual by both higher- and lower-level state officials, whereby the manual's symbolic power is recognised and respected, but where the process it stipulates has little bearing on the nitty-gritty localised work of deciding who accesses state resources. Many state actors are complicit in this performance, with higher-level officials content so long as the target is adhered to, and local officials careful to revere the manual and the associated higher-level instructions whilst simultaneously effectively ignoring (or bypassing) them. Both lower- and higher-level officials are thus engaged in a process of (mis)representing statistics in particular ways to suit their needs.

The Process of Administering the Poverty Census

Returning to the poverty census process itself, as we have seen, on a practical level, completing a detailed inventory of each household's income and assets would be an enormous and time-consuming operation. What the commune uses instead is a simplified, one-page assessment sheet. The sheet is extremely brief, with no narrative explanation, and simply lists 11 areas for the assessment of a household's assets, with points allocated according to whether the assets exist, and what their value is. At the top of the page there is a space in which the name of the household should be entered, along with the household's registration number. At the bottom of the sheet is a space which the head of the household is expected to sign, to validate the assessment process undertaken by the commune officer.

The 11 assets against which the household's poverty status is assessed are as follows: the total area of the house (in metres squared); the value of the motorbike; the type and value of the bed; whether they have a cupboard, wardrobe, table and chairs and their respective values; the value of any video player and mobile phones; the presence and value

of a colour television; ownership of a buffalo, cow or horse; number of pigs owned; presence of a milling machine or thresher; the amount of corn seed available for the next harvest; and the amount of rice seed. In October every year, commune officials undertake the census using this sheet and divide households into one of four categories: poor, near-poor, average, or better-off. The household is supposed to be given a score according to each criterion in the list, and designated one of these four categories.

Only two or three households in the whole commune are considered 'better-off', and only two or three households in each village are given the 'average' status. These households are generally well known and are not surveyed in the poverty census process. All the other households are visited, usually at night when residents are typically at home, and an inventory taken of their assets according to the poverty checklist. I was resident in Vĩnh Thủy during the months in which the commune poverty census took place and accompanied local Party-state officers in their census work over the course of many nights, in different villages in the commune. I observed first-hand the use of the simplified sheet, and the ambiguity it allowed in the process of interpreting and recording assets seemingly 'objectively'. It is this ambiguity that is critical in the local re-working of the state's poverty classification project and the exercise of discretionary power by local powerholders.

Local Party-State Officials and the Census Process

In Vĩnh Thủy commune a handful of chronically destitute households are recognised as being 'poor'. For the remainder of commune residents, though, the official government-assigned classification of being a poor household (*hộ nghèo*) has little to do with an actual state of material deprivation. Rather, being poor or living in poverty is a state-constructed and assigned category. Consequently, intense competition exists amongst commune households to be recognised and officially designated as 'poor' and therefore able to lay claim to the government welfare resources that are so important in transforming household well-being and prospects for the accumulation of capital. Those who end up being classified as poor are not exclusively the most needy, as the poverty classification process is shot through

with Ortner's 'projects of power' of commune Party-state officers (Ortner 2006). They shepherd government poverty reduction resources towards family, kin, friends and allies — a very wide and fairly inclusive network.

The key commune Party-state officers involved in the poverty census process are the village head (*trưởng thôn*) and the village mentor (*cán bộ đỡ đầu thôn*). They work as a team to visit each household in the village and undertake the census process, using the one-page inventory form of household assets. Village mentors enjoy a powerful position in the commune system. They are senior commune officers whose role is to supervise and advise the village heads and oversee all aspects of village management and administration. They therefore exert considerable power and influence over village politics and administration. Most village mentors in Vĩnh Thủy are long-standing residents of the commune with powerful family networks behind them, and are deeply embedded as elites in the local system of commune politics.

For their part, village heads have complex motivations for taking up their role. Some village heads are also deeply engaged in commune and village politics, with their own extensive networks of patronage and control. A younger generation of recently appointed village heads have numeracy, Vietnamese literacy, and some training in the government system — skills usually gained through army service. It is these village heads who are most likely to at least attempt to follow the prescribed process for the household poverty census, and who consequently often face difficulties and conflict with entrenched interests within the village and commune.

For those Party-state officials who attempt to follow the prescribed process, the first problem they face is that household livelihoods seldom fit snugly into the centre state–designated income categories. Poverty is not the static state that policy architects envisaged. Rather, household wellbeing is continually in flux. As a newly appointed village head despairingly commented to me during his first year of attempting to do the survey:

> It's very hard to know a household's exact income because it changes all the time. A near-poor household might lose cattle to disease and then they quickly become poor, and similarly a poor household may

get piglets and thus quickly become much better-off. The form asks us to record the household's income at the time we take the survey, but their circumstances can change very quickly, often from day to day.

While a handful of village heads (particularly the newer ones) try hard to complete the process with some form of ritual diligence, others see it as an opportunity to build political capital in the commune and demonstrate their effectiveness to their superiors. One long-standing and entrepreneurial village head explained to me how he had been highly strategic that year in meeting his quota for the number of poor households to be removed from the poor list. He boasted how he had kept a few households 'in reserve' to take off next year's list, so that he would not have to bother too much with the process next year and could demonstrate to the commune leaders that he was quick and effective in carrying out the task. This particular village head is closely aligned through marriage to the dominant Nùng family group in the commune administration, and is also from the largest and wealthiest kin group in his village. He is adept at using the poverty reduction resources of the government to lubricate his village patronage network, with most of his close family and associates officially designated as poor and thus in receipt of the full portfolio of government assistance.

Removing households from the poor list in response to the poverty reduction targets set by the commune is a source of considerable angst to some village heads. They complained that it was extremely difficult to find households to remove from the list. One common strategy is to rotate households off and on the list every year. This was the case with the household of Ms Sèng Thị Sáng in Bình Yên village. She explained that the previous year her neighbour had been on the list and she had not, but that this year she was informed that it would be her turn. Her neighbour had received some asbestos sheeting for her roof during her time on the poor list, but Ms Sáng gleefully related how upset her neighbour was this year when Ms Sáng herself had received 50 chickens as part of a poverty reduction program.

Rotating people off and on the list is a popular strategy for village heads as it ensures their networks can be maintained or even expanded on the promise that a household will receive government support in the future. It is also a means for minimising conflict in the village through ensuring that every household receives government support at some time, irrespective of whether they are 'poor' according to the official

classification in any one particular year. Villagers have the belief that their representatives have a responsibility to look after them, should be able to bring outside resources into the village, and will distribute these resources so that every household receives something. These perceptions appear to have deep roots in highland sociality and continue to be important today (see the following discussion of the Hải brothers in Ninh Căn village).

Conflict between the village head and mentor frequently occurs over who should and should not be included or removed from the list. One long-standing village head related to me how he had withdrawn from the census process last year, in protest at the difficulty in deciding who should be taken off the list. He left the decision to the village mentor, at the same time ensuring that he could not be blamed by those who would no longer receive government support. Conflict also occurs when the political projects of local powerholders come up against either the central state's 'technical' project or local conceptions of justice and redistribution, which still persist.

This was the case in one village where I followed the census process closely. The village head withdrew after a dispute with the mentor over a particular household. The village head had wanted to remove the household from the poor list because he claimed they made his life difficult and 'didn't follow village regulations'. The mentor, however, felt the household deserved to stay on the list as they were markedly poorer than many other households in the village. The mentor felt that the village head was being 'too emotional' about the process. In this particular case, the mentor responsible for the census process was also the commune officer responsible for the overall process. He had a reputation for being thorough and trustworthy, and crucially had no family allegiances in the particular village for which he was responsible. This village was also the central village in the commune, and was most open to critical scrutiny. In this case, then, the attempt by the village head to assert his power and authority was unsuccessful, and an alternative conception of redistribution and justice prevailed instead.

The Poverty Census Process as an 'Exercise of Paper Only'

In four of the 12 villages in the commune there was little evidence of the poverty census process actually having taken place at all, though the documentation was completed by the end of October and was filed in the commune office. In terms of physical infrastructure and the relative well-being of village residents, these villages were among the most remote and poorest in the commune. Two of these villages were also Dao villages, with the Dao being political outsiders in the commune, having little representation in the formal power structure, and little ability to demand government resources. The village mentors and village heads in these villages would give vague answers in response to my questions over the progress of the census, and would always defer my requests to join them on their household visits. When I questioned residents of these villages about the poverty census, they had little knowledge of the process. There was no village meeting to discuss and endorse the outcome of the census process as prescribed in the official manual (though this also did not occur often in the other villages of the commune). Shrouding the process in secrecy is therefore an effective strategy deployed by local powerholders to ensure that they can allocate government resources as they please, and frees them from investing time in an otherwise lengthy process, enabling their pursuit of other projects.

Most village mentors have little time for the formal census process, describing it as an exercise 'of paper only'.[10] After one long evening spent visiting households to complete the survey form with the village head and mentor, we relaxed in the village head's house and, after drinking several cups of corn wine, they explained what they really thought of the process:

> In fact we already know who the poor households are in the village. We visit the households only to complete the documentation properly and in particular to get the signature of household heads so that there

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10   This echoes David Dery's notion of 'papereality', which describes the widening gap in bureaucratic organisations between what is reported and what actually occurs (Dery 1998). MacLean (2013) discusses how this 'papereality' has been central to the operation of the Vietnamese state since collectivisation. The gap between what local officials report and what actually happens contributes to the illegibility of the countryside to central-level officials and manifests distrust between levels of government.

won't be any complaints afterwards. If we don't get the signature then people will always complain that they don't agree with the assessment or that they weren't consulted.

For some village mentors, particularly the most powerful in the commune, the household assessment process is only a formality. One day late in October, I was discussing the poverty census process in the commune office with Mr Nam, the village mentor for Thạch Liêm village and a highly experienced commune officer. There were only a few days left until the process had to be completed, but he had yet to visit a single household in the village. When I asked him how he hoped to finish before the end of the month he replied that he had already identified the households that would be beneficiaries and those that would not. All that he had to do now was visit the village to get the forms signed. Securing the signature of the household head on the poverty census form meant the process was endorsed and valid in the eyes of the state, irrespective of whether the process had been completed as intended. The symbolic and ritual importance of the form thus imbues the process with an authenticity which disguises the operation of particular political forms of long-standing local patronage and reciprocity quite at odds with the 'official' purpose of the census process as prescribed by the higher state.

The Struggle to be Poor: The Politics of Eligibility to State Resources

Complaints over the allocation of government resources provide a constant source of gossip and intrigue in the commune. Countless examples were related to me during conversations with households about who received what, and on what basis they were entitled. For example, Mrs Hồ Ngân Giang, a poor resident of Ninh Điền B village, could not understand why her household did not receive an educational allowance intended for very poor households when a household in a neighbouring village did receive it, despite the household in question not being poor (at least in her view). Mrs Giang's concern reflects the important reality in Vĩnh Thủy commune that state resources nominally intended for the genuinely poor often find their way to those who are substantially better-off.

Local Party-state officials play a critical role in determining the allocation of these government poverty reduction resources, as we have seen, principally through deciding who will be on the poor list. But local people are also actively engaged in the politics of the process, lobbying these local officials aggressively and doing all they can to render themselves 'legible' (or visible) to state decision-makers. Once legible, they can go about establishing their claims for entitlement to government resources through being classified as poor. Partha Chatterjee has described how this form of engagement with the state requires political literacy on the part of the citizenry: an understanding of how the distribution process works and the rules of the game that surround entitlement and laying claim to resources (Chatterjee 2004).

Securing entitlement also requires a level of political capital in being able to establish connections to powerholders. In their struggle to be called poor, Vĩnh Thủy residents exploit all kinds of connections, including those of kinship and marriage, obligations, business connections, and friendship. As one village head observed:

> I get many visitors to my house once people know that the [poverty census] survey is going to start soon. People come and tell me all about their problems and their hardships. They also remind me of the times that they've helped me or my family in the past. They really put me under a lot of pressure.

This pressure comes from both above and below, as he went on to explain: 'I also have to think about people in the commune government too, and what they think. They watch the [survey] process very carefully, particularly if they've got some interests in the village.' During the poverty census process in Vĩnh Thủy, I observed a range of strategies that households used in attempting to establish their credentials as being poor. These can be categorised as follows: concealing resources; leveraging utility, position and status; manipulating government categories; and exploiting the ambiguity of government eligibility criteria. Local Party-state officials are intimately complicit in these strategies and, in the process, ensure that the state remains relevant to the Hmông and Nùng in the commune, and that long-standing practices of inclusion and expectations of mutuality and obligation are met. In what follows, I provide some vignettes from the commune which illustrate how each of these strategies are used.

Concealing Resources

Concealing resources in the intimate environment of a village, where everybody knows everybody else's business, is very difficult. It is particularly difficult to conceal assets from village heads, who make it their business to know what is going on in the village and who has what. Concealment therefore requires a degree of complicity on the part of village officials, either through fear, through a vested interest in benefiting from the concealment, or through a sense of doing right according to prevailing norms of fairness, obligation, and community cohesion.

One night during the census process I accompanied the village head and village mentor to visit a household along the main street of Ninh Điền B village, in the centre of the commune. One of the questions in the checklist required the household respondent to estimate the amount of hybrid corn seed in their possession. The household head reported a minimal amount, in spite of the presence of a large number of corn sacks stacked in the front room which he claimed to be storing for a neighbour. Once we left the house I asked the village head about these sacks and he reported matter-of-factly that the household was engaged in corn trading, a highly lucrative endeavour in the commune. But he had written down the minimal figure as reported by the household head, despite knowing that it was not true. 'What can I do?' he said with a shrug. The household, as I later discovered, was closely related to a senior commune official.

On another occasion I was visiting village Cao Thành A during the census process. I visited the household of a close relative of the village head, Mr Nhã, in the company of the village head and the village mentor. Cao Thành A is one of the more remote villages and the people here are poorer than those in the central villages of the commune. But this house was of sturdier construction and the beds were relatively new, with a cabinet, table and chairs and even floor tiles overlaying the mud floor in the main room, which was unusual in this village. Despite this, the household was marked as poor in the census, as minimal corn seed and household assets were recorded.

I returned to the village several days later and wandered past the house, noting a new motorbike in the front yard, along with a number of bags of fertiliser inside the front door, which had not been present

at the time of my previous visit. Casually discussing the household with a neighbour, she wryly noted that two of the sons were currently working in a timber mill in a commune close to the Chinese border, and that they sent back significant remittances every month. These were not recorded during the census process, though the village head (and presumably the mentor) would have been well aware of these contributions to the household income.

On yet another occasion I was participating in the survey process in Ninh Căn village when we arrived at the house of the Hải brothers. Situated on a small plot beside the main path through the village, their house was extremely run-down, almost derelict. There was only an old bed and cupboard in the room in which the boys lived, which was littered with dried corn cobs used to feed the cooking fire. The commune officers related approvingly how the two brothers aged 18 and 15 were both extremely hard workers, working their small piece of land to produce local corn. Their father had died seven years ago and their mother abandoned them soon after in order to remarry in a neighbouring commune. As a result, the older brother had dropped out of school to work the land and care for his younger brother. The attitude of the commune officers towards these boys was paternalistic and caring. They were perceived to be worthy recipients of state support because of their tragic circumstances.

Whilst the boys were clearly 'poor' under any definition of poverty, local or otherwise, the officials were clearly intent on maximising the boys' entitlement as they carefully recorded all of their assets on the census sheet and cajoled them with encouraging questions to ensure they fully reported the hardships they faced, even under-reporting the amount of corn seed stored, as I saw the village mentor write down a far lower figure than the boys themselves had mentioned. The officials waited patiently while the boys tried to find the household registration card, which they eventually located in a dusty drawer, stained and creased. Other villagers would have been reprimanded by the officials for allowing such an important document to deteriorate in such a way, but the officials said nothing, clearly moved by the difficult circumstances in which the two boys were living. In this case, the officials felt obligated to conceal resources and used the process to ensure that the boys were highly legible to the state, in line

with widely held moral perceptions in the commune that there is an obligation to look after those who are the victims of circumstances outside of their control.

Leveraging Utility, Position and Status

An example of leveraging position occurred in An Trí 1 village where we visited the household of a teacher at the intermediate school, who had recently moved to the village from another commune. This household held a certificate from the commune office in their previous village, stating that they were a near-poor household. Having recently moved, the household had no agricultural land, which is an important determinant of wealth in the poverty census process, which measures crop production. But both husband and wife were teachers and earned a stable income far greater than the majority of households in the commune. The household had a large refrigerator and ran a well-provisioned store from the front of the house. They also had two motorbikes, one of which was a late model, almost brand-new Honda costing several thousand US dollars. Despite this, the commune officer recorded them as being near-poor. He explained at the time that they had been near-poor in their previous commune and it was difficult to change their status, but there were clearly other factors at work that influenced his decision.

A few nights later, I was drinking corn wine with the village head and mentor after a night of visiting households in the same village and the discussion returned once more to the teachers' household. The mentor was slightly drunk and explained the decision as follows:

> It's really difficult to get teachers to stay in this commune. It's far from Cao Xuyên [the district town] and even further from Lào Cai City. If you're educated, why would you want to live here? We have to make it attractive to make sure that the teachers want to stay.[11]

Although the officials did not reveal the details of what had actually transpired, the implication from our discussion was that the household had successfully leveraged their important position to ensure their categorisation as 'near-poor'. At the same time, the officials involved

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11   He went on to say, 'In their case both of them are teachers.' By this final statement, I understood him to be saying that this household's utility to the commune was double, as there were two teachers, so it was even more important to keep them happy.

had been willingly complicit, and may have even suggested the classification scenario in order to ensure the teachers stayed in the village to the benefit of the whole commune.

Manipulating State Categories

Another popular strategy deployed by villagers is to manipulate state categories to ensure that the household is recognised as poor.[12] One prevalent way of doing this appears to be 'splitting' the household. While examining completed forms from my household survey I was struck by the number of new households registered just prior to commencement of the poverty census process in October. When I cross-checked with the survey returns for the households in which the newly separate households had previously resided, they invariably recorded a drop in their registered status — i.e. from near-poor to poor, or from average to near-poor or poor. The 'splitting' process always involved a young couple leaving the parental home to establish their own household. However, in practice the newly established household usually took up residence in a simply constructed house located a few metres from the parental home, as new land for house construction in the commune is not easily acquired. In all of the instances of household splitting that I came across, the two households continued to share resources, indeed they often still lived together in the one parental house, with the second house usually of rudimentary construction and remaining unoccupied.[13]

The Hoàng family in Bình Yên village is a case in point. The grandfather explained that the family had decided to split in August of the previous year, with his youngest son and daughter-in-law establishing their own home on the edge of the family compound. The grandfather explained that he had divided his land between his two sons, that he had given them each a buffalo (he had two) and that the three families were now 'separate'. As such, they each qualified

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12   This was also apparent during the land reform period in Vietnam, with households engaging in this strategy in order to avoid being called 'landlords' or wealthy peasants, and was also apparent during the collectivisation period, during which households manoeuvred to maintain the 5 per cent of land available for individual production. During the decollectivisation period, households also deployed this strategy to maximise the land they could prioritise for production (MacLean 2013).

13   This process of household fissioning may also have been a traditional form of risk management in upland areas.

as 'near-poor' when their assets were registered in the poverty census process. However, all of the corn and rice grown on their land was stored in the loft space of the grandfather's house, he cared for the two buffalos, which continued to be housed in the pens next to his house, and he spent the day babysitting the youngest child of his son while the family worked the land. The recently split family of his youngest son continued to eat their meals in the paternal house, and all of the assets and resources of the family appeared to be pooled in the grandfather's house. If assessed collectively as one household, however, they would have been registered as 'average' and thus not entitled to poverty reduction support.

While the decision to split the household was no doubt genuine and based upon a sincere wish on the part of the younger son to make his own way, in practice they continued to live in one multi-generational household, as the government's concept of a single generation household is anathema to the way the Hmông, Nùng, and other ethnic groups in the commune choose to live. The Hoàng household appeared to recognise the opportunity that 'splitting' provided and went through the process of registering the household as separate, thereby rendering themselves eligible for support as a near-poor household.[14] On their part, local officials do not appear to question this process and simply record the new household and the assets of each household as separate. Local officials appear to flexibly apply local norms to this process of household fissioning, using the government's assumption of discreet and segmented 'nuclear' family clusters against itself. At the same time, through flexibly interpreting the eligibility criteria, government officials appear intent on ensuring that the Hmông (and other groups in the commune) remain engaged and onside with the state, and that the state in turn remains relevant to them.

Exploiting Ambiguities in State Eligibility Criteria

Closely related to the manipulation of government categories is the strategy of exploiting any ambiguity in regulations pertaining to who is eligible to benefit from poverty reduction projects. This ambiguity stems from the fact that some projects and programs do not explicitly

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14   In order to be recognised, a new household must register with the commune authorities and apply for a new household registration book, which is the most important state document held by people in the commune.

establish who the beneficiaries should be, stating only that the resources should be used for 'poverty reduction'. Local officials thus have the discretionary power to decide upon the allocation of resources. In the case of a project to provide 50 free ducks to households for poverty reduction, local people in Tràng Tôn village successfully exploited the lack of clarity over entitlement to the resources and lobbied the village head to distribute the ducks to every household in half of the village instead. The half of the village that did not receive the ducks subsequently received free chickens under another project in the following year.

In this case, eligibility exploded out from the category of the poor, with state resources that were supposed to be carefully targeted instead going to everyone. In a context where many in the village are indeed poor, this is perhaps a better outcome in the eyes of local state officials, given that it ensures cohesion and adherence to perceptions of what is appropriate and 'just'. It also cements the sense of relevance of the state to those who benefit — an important long-term political goal in the borderlands. The state's targeting of poor households is thus allowed to be subverted by a more locally embedded conception of entitlement, albeit one that reinforces existing hierarchies in the village and bolsters the political projects of the powerful.

'Stasis' and Bypassed Development for the Unconnected

In Vĩnh Thủy commune, important state resources for poverty reduction which the centre state intends to direct to those most in need often end up with those at the local level who are the most politically literate and therefore best able to establish claims upon them. Local commune officials appear to actively facilitate lapses in the official process of identifying the poor for three reasons. Firstly, because many of the beneficiaries are network clients of these officials, by including them in the poor list they bolster their political capital and pool of obligations and indebtedness. Secondly, officials are keenly aware of the need to adhere to long-standing traditions of general sharing, mutuality and cooperation which underpin the operation of harmonious social relations in the commune. Delivering poverty reduction support fulfils the expectations of them as leaders of the

two dominant ethnic groups (Hmông and Nùng) to provide for their own. And lastly, dispensing government poverty reduction support is a way of keeping a large number of people engaged with the state, an important expectation placed upon them as local officials by higher up officials in the state hierarchy. This, in turn, ensures that the commune remains peaceful and harmonious and, as an effect if not a goal of state policy, that alternative centres of power and mobilisation around ethnicity — or religion in the case of the Hmông — do not develop.

What ensues is the perpetuation of entrenched hierarchies of power in the commune. This ensures a desired degree of stability and predictability in the commune but has consequences for those who are politically unimportant and often desperately lacking in material resources as a result. These people are largely left behind in the struggle for state resources that I have described. They lack the political skills to render themselves legible and eligible for the state support that would structurally change their lives, such as loans for buffalo (reserved for the 'productive' near-poor), substantial production inputs (they have little land and so are not deemed eligible for this kind of assistance), or a role in pioneering new agro-industrial crops in which the government invests heavily to encourage production.

Paradoxically, a significant shift has taken place in the northern borderlands over the past 10 to 15 years, whereby the state is now able to ensure a minimum level of subsistence and food security for destitute and chronically deprived households. Nobody starves anymore because the state ensures a minimum provision of subsistence for everyone. This was often cited to me as perhaps the most important change to have occurred in the commune over the past 15 years, according to both local Party-state officials and local people.

The household of Mrs Dương Thị Mát from Thạch Liêm village illustrates this well. Her household is one of the poorest in the commune, and she claimed 'if the government didn't support us we'd probably die with nothing to eat'. Over the past few years, the government has provided her with the essentials of food and shelter. She has received timber for reinforcing her ramshackle house, asbestos sheeting to waterproof the roof, and 10 kilograms of rice for each person in her household, which they sell in order to buy enough corn to see them through the hungry season when their own meagre corn supply is finished. The household lacks sufficient land, which is a

feature of most chronically poor households in the commune, and this lack of land is also the reason given by local officers for not allocating hybrid corn seed and fertiliser to them. The lack of land also precludes the chronically poor from engaging in the lucrative projects of the commune to plant high-value agro-industrial crops, such as tea and tobacco. The chronically poor are politically unconnected and thus locked in a condition of stasis. They are assured of the basics of food and shelter, but do not have access to state largesse and opportunities which could potentially transform their lives. Instead, these resources go to better off, politically well-connected and politically literate others, which in turn ensures that the political equilibrium of the commune is maintained, along with the social status quo.

The chronically poor appear to fall through the gap between two conceptions of entitlement. They are virtually invisible in the 'moral economy' schema of ensuring social harmony and reciprocity, as they are outside of the important kin lineages and clan networks, and, with little status or influence, they are unimportant to local powerholders. At the same time, the subversion of the government's technocratic poverty survey system, which might have privileged them as key beneficiaries of the full suite of state support, closes off to them the only other possible avenue for the accumulation of resources necessary to structurally transform their livelihoods. Stasis is hard to escape for these chronically poor outsiders who include smaller ethnic groups in the commune (particularly the Dao) which lack political representation in the commune government, and those households amongst the dominant Hmông and Nùng groups who primarily live in the more remote villages of the commune and are outside of privileged networks or family lineages.

This lack of connectedness and inability to render themselves legible means that the powerless are often exploited by commune powerholders. In Cao Thành B village, for example, the very poorest households are eligible for an educational support fee that is supposed to offset the additional costs that households face in sending their children to school. In practice, the very poor never receive the support fee, reinforcing their sense of powerlessness and exclusion. As one woman explained: 'We have to sign every month that we have received the money but in fact the money goes straight to the teachers at the school and we never see it. Even though we sign for it, it's never given to us.' Her friend went on to explain:

In this village the rich families get more things from the government than the poor families. Here they just choose some families who they want to give things to. If they like someone they give things to them. We go along to all of the village meetings but we're not invited to speak. It's always the same people who speak. And we're never told about what things the commune has given the village, and when they will be handed out, and to whom. The village head just tells us that we need to work hard and be nice and if the government has anything he will bring it to us.

Despite facing structural obstacles and serial marginalisation through this lack of connectedness, these disadvantaged and chronically destitute households still aspire to 'play the game' and struggle to render themselves legible to local powerholders. They live within, and are confined by, the prevailing governmental categories that are constructed locally, even though these categories and associated practices are responsible for their continued immiseration. Without social or political capital they have little opportunity to successfully influence these structures to improve their prospects and, as a consequence, state development processes largely pass them by.

Conclusion

This chapter has argued that state discourses of 'poverty' and the practices of 'poverty reduction' that are prevalent in Vĩnh Thủy commune today are contemporary manifestations of the historical project of power of the Party-state in the borderlands: to categorise and regulate ethnic minority people and upland landscapes in a way that renders them amenable to rule. In pursuing this project, state planners today continue the long-standing practice of governance in the uplands, of attempting to co-opt and work through local ethnic elites.[15] In Vĩnh Thủy commune these local political elites exercise power in two registers: they are embedded in the state bureaucracy and act as the local executors of centre state power, but also sustain and grow their own local networks of power and influence in order to meet their local obligations and the expectations of their communities.

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15   Historically, the Hmông appeared to be one of the groups most subject to domination by ruling elites in the northwest highlands, principally by Thai elites who acted as local brokers for the colonial state. It is also worth noting that the Nùng are classified in Vietnamese state ethnography as a sub-group of the Thai (see Vạn et al. 2000).

State poverty reduction support to the borderlands serves to bind these politically important elites and a large number of upland people to the state, while also allowing them significant local autonomy to exercise power.

The standardised, technocratic construction of the category of 'the poor' that I have discussed in this chapter is the product of the prevalent 'developmentalism' of state planners and their international partners. The narrow policies and practices that they put in place are central technologies of government in Vĩnh Thủy commune, for they permeate everyday life and bureaucratic practice in pervasive ways. At the same time, though, these categories are resolutely local in that they are interpreted, applied and manipulated through the active agency of local state officials and local people. They are deeply embedded in local social and political relations and in prevailing 'moral economy' perceptions, and both shape and are shaped by local values, strategies and statuses — what Bourdieu aptly describes as a process of 'regulated improvisation' (Bourdieu 1977:79). Both the 'overbearing state' and 'agentive periphery' views that I outlined earlier thus appear equally apposite. In fact, processes embodying these different tendencies are entangled and inseparable, laying to rest any notion of a clear separation between distinct state and local political cultures. In a manner evocative of Scott's political *metis* (1998), local officials and local people deploy their accumulated knowledge and experience to dexterously negotiate the governmental categories to which they are subject, with varying degrees of success.

In Vĩnh Thủy commune, the modern state's biopolitical project of fostering life and a productive population through providing poverty reduction support has been reworked by local elites and those in their networks to deploy a local form of biopower of their own. They have colonised the centre state's technocratic and generalised categories, and instead deploy highly personalistic and localised criteria for inclusion. As we have seen, this is made possible through the internal inconsistencies in the centre state's own process which opens spaces for local officials to decide what best constitutes human development for the populace, and who in particular should benefit. Local elites thus exemplify political *metis*, for the ability to act as they do is dependent upon the poverty reduction project of the central state from which they draw sustenance and inspiration. This form of biopower gives local expression to the modern state's standardising, normalising,

and regularising logics, but it does so in a way that is simultaneously embedded in and rigorously disciplined by the obligations, standards, and expectations prevalent in local moral economy relations.

Local elites assume primary responsibility for supporting life in the commune through their control of state poverty reduction processes and associated material resources, and commune residents in turn do all they can to ensure that they are connected to and enveloped in this local biopolitical schema. But it is not all encompassing. Those who lack the social and political capital necessary to establish connections to local state powerholders lose out. They lack the political literacy or performative competency to render themselves legible and connected to these powerholders. Consequently, the very system intended to reduce inequality and structurally transform the livelihoods of the chronically deprived — the system for poverty reduction — serves instead only to reinforce their local subordination and perpetuate their continued disconnection.

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